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FROM SON TAY TO DESERT ONE: LESSONS UNLEARNED

by

JAMES M. MIS

MAJOR, UNITED STATES ARMY

SEMINAR 8

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: *James M. Mis*

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Paper directed by Captain George W. Jackson

Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

John D. Waghelstein
Professor John D. Waghelstein
Faculty Advisor

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Abstract of

FROM SON TAY TO DESERT ONE: LESSONS UNLEARNED

In the planning, preparation and execution of special operations, lessons learned from previous missions are sometimes overlooked or discounted. This was true of the Iranian Rescue Mission undertaken in April 1980, which failed, in part, by not studying and following the lessons learned from the Son Tay Raid ten years before.

By examining these missions through the principles of objective, unity of command, unity of effort, and security, the contrasts between these complex special operations are clearly illustrated. Like all military operations, special operations require a clear objective coupled with political commitment, a unified effort directed toward the attainment of these objectives, a well-defined chain of command, and security, both operational security and force protection.

While failing to rescue any American prisoners, the Son Tay Raid was nearly flawless in its execution and validated the need to insure that these principles are observed. However, from the beginning of planning, the Iranian Rescue Mission failed to recognize the need to abide by these principles and would end in disaster. In its failure, the Iranian Rescue Mission has served as a catalyst for major improvements among today's Special Operations Forces (SOF), but serious oversights continue to be committed, especially with regard to unity of effort and objective.

With the emergence of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) as a predominant focus of today's military, SOF must be prepared to conduct complex special operations. By learning from past successes and failures, SOF can insure that the principles of war and MOOTW are not neglected.

Introduction

Today's Special Operations Forces (SOF) have reached an unprecedented level of national respect and confidence. At no other time in US military history have the capabilities of SOF been so valued by the nation's leadership. When developing courses of action in response to a crisis, our political and military leaders are as ready to consider the use of SOF as they are of pushing the button on a Tomahawk missile.

This evolution of special operations and their use in gaining objectives of national importance has been long, lined with both successes and failures. From SOF's past accomplishments and failings, lessons are learned and improvements in "special operational art" are made. However, sometimes the lessons-learned from a past operation are not followed-up on subsequent missions of the same caliber and scope. Two such operations were the Son Tay Raid and the Iranian Rescue Mission.

As will be discussed, the Son Tay Raid, while failing to locate and free any prisoners-of-war (POW), was nearly flawless in its execution. This would not be the case a decade later during the Iranian Rescue Mission. Many of the principles which made the raid on Son Tay so successful would be overlooked, discounted or neglected during the planning to rescue the Americans in Iran.

This paper compares these two special operations by examining them through four principles, three of which are common to both war and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). These principles are: **objective**, to include the political commitment necessary to achieve them; **unity of command**; **unity of effort**; and **security**, examining how it can not only serve but also hinder.

This paper also examines how special operations stand today in relation to these principles. Are the forces who execute special operations, and the politicians who wield them as a instrument of policy, heeding the lessons of the past? Or, as in April 1980, are we neglecting to learn by falling into the same traps?

Background: Son Tay Raid

Operation IVORY COAST, the raid on the North Vietnamese POW camp at Son Tay, just twenty-three miles from Hanoi, was executed on 21 November 1970. Its objective was to free the

seventy US POWs reportedly being held there. To the North Vietnamese, these POWs, like all US prisoners, served as hostages and bargaining chips in forcing the withdrawal of the United States from Southeast Asia.¹

After five months of planning and preparation, the Joint Task Force (JTF), commanded by Brigadier General LeRoy Manor (USAF), was given the approval to execute by President Nixon. Departing from bases in Thailand, the rescue force, consisting of USAF HH-53 and HH-3 helicopters, MC-130 refueling aircraft, and Army Special Forces (SF), infiltrated into North Vietnam from the west, while Navy fighters launched from aircraft carriers created a diversion in the east.

The rescue force, led by the deputy JTF commander Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons (USA), commenced the raid at 0218 hours Hanoi-time. One HH-3 helicopter conducted a controlled crash-landing directly into the walled-compound, inserting a 13-man assault element, while security teams were positioned outside to isolate the camp.

The only mischance that occurred in the opening moments was that twenty-one SF soldiers, including Colonel Simons, were mistakenly inserted at a site identified as the "Secondary School". This site, located 200 meters south of the actual objective, looked very much like the Son Tay prison. However, the possibility of this mistake was foreseen during planning and was rehearsed numerous times. The contingency plan was quickly implemented as one HH-53 returned to pick-up the force after only five minutes and reinserted them in the proper place.²

Inside the prison compound, all enemy forces were quickly neutralized. After searching the entire camp, the call of "Negative Items" was made to Colonel Simon's command post, indicating that no POWs had been located. After twenty-nine minutes on the ground, the Son Tay raiders exfiltrated back to Thailand without the POWs for whom they had come. Intelligence would later determine that the US prisoners had been moved three months earlier.

While no Americans were rescued, the raid was executed precisely as planned.³ Some though, would view the Son Tay Raid as a failure. As later discussion may illustrate, the opposite view may very well be true.

Background: Iranian Rescue Mission

On 04 November 1979 five hundred Iranian revolutionaries, under the spiritual leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini, stormed the American embassy in Tehran taking sixty US citizens captive. These revolutionaries viewed their hostages as a means to induce the United States to return the deposed Shah for trial in Iran.

After diplomatic efforts failed to gain their freedom, President Carter directed the execution of Operation EAGLE CLAW to rescue the hostages through military means. The JTF, commanded by Major General James B. Vaught (USA), had planned and prepared since its inception eight days after the embassy was seized. On 24 April 1980, the rescue commenced.

The rescue operation called for the six MC-130s to transport the SF assault force and US Army Ranger security elements from Egypt into Iran to a remote, makeshift landing strip dubbed "Desert One", located 265 nautical miles from Tehran. Eight RH-53 helicopters, with Marine pilots, would launch from an aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea and rendezvous with the other elements at Desert One.

After refueling, the helicopters would transport the assault force to a remote mountain location fifty miles from Tehran where they would remain in concealed positions during daylight. During the hours of darkness, the assault force would be transported to Tehran in vehicles procured by American operatives inserted into Iran, and storm the embassy freeing the hostages.⁴ The helicopters would then fly into the embassy compound and whisk the assaulters and the freed hostages to a desert airstrip at Manzariyeh, thirty-five miles to the south, which would be secured by the Ranger security team. C-141 aircraft would land at the strip and all US personnel would be transported to freedom.

As history so vividly displayed, the operation on 24-25 April 1980 did not proceed as planned. After encountering a tremendous dust-storm, only six of the original eight RH-53s made it to Desert One. Two helicopters had experienced mechanical problems enroute. One of these was abandoned, while the second returned to the USS Nimitz. Six helicopters arrived at Desert One, but one of these also had mechanical problems which would prevent it from taking off again. Since it was pre-determined that six RH-53s were necessary to continue the mission, this final helicopter failure served as

the "coup de grace", the cancellation point for the mission. The ultimate decision to abort the mission was made by President Carter.

At Desert One, Colonel James Kyle (USAF), the on-scene commander, instructed all operational helicopters to refuel and return to the Nimitz; the MC-130s were to return straight back to Egypt. While repositioning to refuel, one RH-53 encountered wind gusts which forced it into a gasoline-laded MC-130, setting off an enormous explosion. Desert One quickly became a scene of chaos, as personnel scrambled to depart the area. All helicopters were ordered abandoned and the rescue force departed Iran, leaving behind eight dead comrades.

This unsuccessful hostage rescue became an embarrassment for the Carter Administration and the United States. After 444 days in captivity, the hostages were released as President Reagan was sworn-in on 20 January 1981, nine months after the aborted rescue attempt.

Objective

Every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.⁵ At each level of war (strategic, operational and tactical) an objective exists which may differ, but must be interconnected and not divergent. Commitment to attaining the objective must be made by leaders at all levels. Since certain special operations, such as the Son Tay Raid and the Iranian Rescue Mission, are aimed toward a strategic objective with national consequences, this commitment begins with the President. In these special operations, objectives must be clearly defined, while political commitment is displayed as readily as physical courage and commitment is displayed by the special operators.

At the outset of the planning for the Son Tay Raid, clearly the objective was to rescue the seventy American POWs located at the camp. But both political and military leaders saw that this operational objective could be expanded. The raid might serve as a way to increase US clout at the peace talks underway in Paris. The embarrassment of having a raid conducted twenty-three miles from Hanoi could force the North Vietnamese to make certain concessions.⁶ While rescuing only seventy POWs, the raid would also have a more far reaching impact on the American prisoners who remained

behind. When asked by Pentagon planners how a raid on one North Vietnamese camp would affect the treatment of other US POWs, one member of the National Security Council well-versed in Vietnamese culture and attitudes replied, "It would be the greatest thing America could do. Their treatment would improve dramatically and instantly."⁷

Was the national political leadership committed to the objectives of the raid? With the actions of Nixon and his top advisers being a litmus test, it would appear so. One may argue that since the US was engaged in the war in Vietnam, the decision to conduct this raid was simple and involved little political risk. Several factors, however, made this decision more difficult than would appear. The US was reducing its involvement in Southeast Asia, while a raid into North Vietnam would give the perception of increased escalation. Other factors such as emerging relations with Red China, Middle-East crises, and stern reaction from Congressional Democrats made President Nixon's decision challenging.

Insuring clear objectives, the Nixon Administration made the commitment to the Son Tay Raid and avoided political interference which would have severely hindered such an operation. One example of this commitment was the request by planners to launch diversionary air attacks into North Vietnam. Hesitant at first, the President did approve these strikes. These air strikes were the first missions by Navy aircraft into North Vietnam in over two years and was the largest night air operation ever over this territory.

Political commitment to the objectives extended to the area of enemy casualties. While briefing National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Colonel Simons broached the subject of enemy casualties and stated that he could not guarantee low enemy casualty figures. Kissinger simply replied, "You do what you need to do. Let us take care of the international impact...use whatever force is essential for the most effective operation."⁸ This clearly indicated to the military leaders that they had the political commitment they needed.

Was this model of clear objectives and political commitment followed during the Iranian Rescue Mission? The obvious operational objective for the rescue in Iran was the safe recovery of the American

hostages. One may not be able to define it as a true objective, but the motivation behind President Carter in his approval of this complex special operation could be inferred as an attempt to curb mounting public pressure to take action. With presidential elections approaching in November 1980, the urgency for Carter to take decisive action grew stronger each day. However, even after ordering American military personnel into harm's way, political commitment from the Carter Administration was not evident.

Unlike Son Tay, the President did not allow a diversionary attack to take place. These operational fires, designed to also serve as a retaliatory attack if the rescue failed, were planned at the highest level of the Pentagon. However, on 23 April 1980, only *one* day before the operation, the President disapproved the air strike. The reasoning behind the decision was to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. The administration's desire to avoid casualties would interfere in the operation throughout its planning and execution.

Numerous briefings were conducted at the White House by General Vaught and Colonel Charlie Beckwith, the assault element commander who would lead the SF teams into the embassy. In one such briefing, Carter Administration officials, especially Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, were surprised and upset to learn that the assaulters intended to shoot the Iranian's guarding the hostages. Beckwith, disoriented over the administrations' confusing guidance, would comment on the episode after the rescue attempt saying,

“...[S]ometimes we would say “How about this ?” and they wouldn't know what we were talking about... We certainly intended to [kill]... the guards...he's my adversary and I'm certainly not going up to him and shake his hand.”⁹

This obscure guidance was just the opposite of the support extended by Kissinger to “Bull” Simons before the raid on Son Tay.

Even after the mishaps at Desert One, Carter refused to send in air strikes to destroy the helicopters which were abandoned. Because of this, classified documents recovered on the aircraft would be used by the Iranians to embarrass the United States.

It is difficult to say if the operation would have been successful if it proceeded beyond Desert One. Other factors discussed later seem to point to the negative. But if Colonel Beckwith's assault element had made it to the embassy and encountered heavier resistance than expected, it is unlikely that President Carter would have approved the large degree of air strikes and firepower needed to extract the assault force and the rescued hostages. If the President refused to allow diversionary air strikes and the air strike to destroy the helicopters in the middle of the remote desert, the chances are that he would not have allowed strikes into the heavily populated downtown area of Tehran.

Following the actions at Son Tay, certain outspoken critics labeled the raid a failure. Granted it did not succeed in rescuing any US POWs, but it did act as a catalyst to bring the North Vietnamese back to the peace talks and served to improve the quality of life for all US POWs. The North Vietnamese, feeling somewhat vulnerable, began moving the prisoners together. For some POWs, this was the first contact with fellow American prisoners and allowed them to mount a defense against their captors.¹⁰ After learning of the raid, the morale of the POWs was raised because they saw that their country had not abandoned them. In classified surveys taken after the war, POWs rated the Son Tay Raid as one of the top two events, along with the bombing of Hanoi, which aided their morale.¹¹ Due to the clearly articulated objectives and political commitment to their achievement, the Son Tay raid is today viewed as a success. While the objective of freeing hostages was clearly stated during the Iranian Rescue Mission, further political objectives clouded the mission, while full commitment was lacking. In the end, eight US servicemen were dead, America suffered irreparable embarrassment and President Carter would lose the election seven months later.

Unity of Command

Unity of command for all operations is important in maintaining positive control over forces to insure they are working towards the objectives. In unique, high-risk special operations, this point is never more important. With its national implications, clearly defined lines of command at all levels is imperative.

From its inception, the Son Tay planners established this model of defined command lines. At initial meetings in the Pentagon, General Manor was appointed commander and Colonel Simons was appointed deputy commander. Manor would maintain overall command and control of the raid from South Vietnam, while Simons, an experienced combat leader well-versed in covert operations, would go forward and maintain on-scene command.

Lieutenant Colonel Warner A. Britton was chosen by Manor to be the helicopter element leader. He was tasked with choosing the helicopter pilots for the mission, and would fly Apple One, the lead HH-53. Lieutenant Colonel Bud Sydnor, a Special Forces officer, was chosen by Simons to be the ground component commander.

The JTF chain of command for the Son Tay Raid was identified and every operator participating in the raid was thoroughly familiar with it. This simplistic yet functional example of unity of command would not be repeated during the Iranian Rescue Mission. This point is clarified by the Holloway Commission, a panel of distinguished US military leaders charged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to investigate the failure of Operation EAGLE CLAW.¹² In its report the Holloway Commission stated,

"Command and control was excellent at the upper echelons, but became more tenuous and fragile at intermediate levels. Command relationships below the Commander, JTF were not clearly emphasized... and were susceptible to misunderstandings under *pressure*."¹³

Infiltrating aircraft and men over 300 miles into Iran to assault a secure compound and rescue fifty-two hostages would obviously present this *pressure*.

When Vaught assumed his duties as commander of the JTF he had the added burden of putting together an ad hoc JTF command and staff structure. Lack in unity of command developed from this point forward. As the Holloway Commission pointed out, no deputy JTF commander was appointed at the outset. This individual could have overseen key aspects of mission preparation, including training and rehearsals while Vaught was busy with high-level planning and pacifying the politicians.¹⁴ However, Major General Phillip Gast (USAF) was appointed as an advisor to Vaught because he had just completed a tour as the head of the US military mission in Tehran. Twelve days before the operation Gast would be appointed deputy JTF commander, but by this time, he had been promoted to

Lieutenant General, creating a tenuous situation in which the JTF commander was outranked by his deputy.

The chain of command below the JTF command level was also vague, at best. Within the helicopter element, the flight lead position was filled by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Sieffert (USMC). Chosen as flight leader because of his extremely competent flying abilities, Sieffert's authority was never established because a more senior ranking officer, Colonel Charles Pittman (USMC), was forced upon him by the JCS to oversee the training of the helicopter crew. Pittman, *an assistant to the Chairman, JCS*, would later fly in the co-pilot position of RH-53 #5. It would be this helicopter which would turn back to the USS Nimitz while enroute to Desert One. Even Vaught would display his confusion over the command of the helicopter element by stating after the operation that he "thought that General Gast was directing much, if not all, of the training."¹⁵ If the JTF commander does not know who is in charge of one of his sub-elements, it is irrational to assume one's subordinates will.

Colonel James Kyle (USAF) was chosen as the MC-130 element commander. Prior to the launching of Operation EAGLE CLAW, Kyle was designated to be the on-scene commander at Desert One. This important detail was not disseminated throughout the different subordinate elements. The Holloway Commission discovered that when the on-scene commander's name surfaced during post mission interviews with helicopter pilots, they stated that "they did not know or recognize the authority of those giving orders at Desert One."¹⁶

Colonel Beckwith, as commander of the elite SF unit which would conduct the actual rescue into the embassy, was designated the assault element leader. Unlike "Bull" Simons on the ground at Son Tay, Beckwith held no further authority outside of the scope of this mission. Beckwith was not even designated the Ground Force Commander, which was retained by Vaught, who was located *1000 miles* away in Qena, Egypt!

While faults in unity of command did not cause the failures of the Iranian Rescue Mission, they interfered with mission preparation from the outset. Training and planning were hindered, especially

within the critical helicopter element. General Manor established a streamlined, functional command structure for Son Tay, while General Vaught, to some respect, failed to establish one at all.

Unity of Effort

Unity of effort emphasizes the need for ensuring all means are directed to a common purpose. This is especially applicable to special operations. The difficulty of such operations drives the need for focused efforts on each level, whether it be in the planning, preparation, or execution phase of the mission.

Unity of effort is developed in the preparation stage through rigorous training and rehearsals which insure readiness and interoperability during execution. At Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, the Son Tay JTF began training and rehearsals for a unified effort immediately. By early October 1970, the entire rescue force was conducting full-mission rehearsals. These rehearsals involved all raid participants practicing all aspects of the operation including contingencies. If it was determined that changes needed to be made, the Son Tay raiders would rehearse again. In the end, as General Manor would tell Kissinger, the raid had been rehearsed "something like 170 times."¹⁷ These integrated, joint rehearsals, including contingencies, would pay-off during the Son Tay Raid when Simon's element was inadvertently inserted at the Secondary School. Because the force had practiced such a scenario numerous times, reactions were automatic and the corresponding contingency plan was immediately executed.

Further illustrating the neglect of lessons-learned from the Son Tay Raid, unity of effort for the Iranian Rescue Mission was never carried through. The Holloway Commission reports that for this rescue mission deep inside Iran, "forces were so interdependent that complete force integration was essential."¹⁸ Yet full-scale joint rehearsals were never attempted, nor was a final rehearsal ever completed. Each element did conduct training in earnest, but interoperability is developed through numerous exercises conducted by the entire force. In its report, the Holloway Commission states:

*"Thoroughly integrated training exercises of the entire JTF for the final plan were not conducted, although joint training of all plan segments was conducted by portions of the component forces in conjunction with their respective roles and tasks."*¹⁹

As an illustration, two key aspects of the Operation EAGLE CLAW were never fully rehearsed. The first was the actual ground assault in Tehran. In this case, it was determined that an additional Special Forces element would be needed to secure three US hostages being held in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. This thirteen-man element, taken from a Special Forces unit stationed in Germany, did not link up with the remainder of the task force until the C-141 transport aircraft stopped in West Germany to pick them up enroute to staging in Egypt.

The second part not fully rehearsed was the crucial refueling and reconfiguring operation at Desert One. As complex and integral to success as this portion of the operation was, it was never rehearsed with all participants. A small exercise using only *two* C-130s and *four* RH-53s was used to validate the Desert One operation. However, the actual force at Desert One called for *six* C-130s and *eight* RH-53s, three times the fixed-wing and twice the number of rotary-winged aircraft used in the validation exercise. This means that the first time the air crews encountered the dust, noise and confusion caused by that many spinning propellers and rotors was during execution. Clearly a full-scale rehearsal would have prepared crews for the actual conditions to be encountered and may have served to prevent the catastrophic mishap which occurred at Desert One.

Security

Security in operations involves not only force protection, but also operational security (OPSEC) to insure that the enemy does not gain an advantage through information leaks. Especially important in special operations, security is enhanced by compartmentalization of information where only certain members of the force are aware of the entire plan and the remainder of the force is familiar only with their portion of the operation. Furthermore, support elements outside of the JTF are not provided with information on the operation, but are given a cover story to conceal the truth. Usually it is a lack of security which causes missions to be compromised, but a balance must be struck between security and mission needs to insure that it does not interfere with mission performance.

Security was strictly maintained throughout the Son Tay Raid. Even when the force arrived at its staging base in Thailand only four members of the ground assault element were aware of the target, let

alone the full-mission. To some degree, Manor felt security concerns interfered with the mission. This was especially true involving liaison with the Strategic Air Command (SAC), which provided aerial photographic interpreters and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) taking the all-important photographs of the Son Tay prison. No one at SAC was privy to any information concerning the raid. After its execution, Manor would state:

"Some difficulty was experienced in coordinating JCTG reconnaissance requirements with the SAC Reconnaissance Center...[A] more intimate knowledge of the requirements would aid considerably in obtaining the desired coverage...[I]n the future...one officer in the SAC Reconnaissance Intelligence requirements Office [should] be briefed on the operation."²⁰

Manor established a precedent for future special operations by showing that mission execution can be hindered by overburdening security. Ten years later, the Holloway Commission would cite interference from security considerations as the major contribution to the Iranian Rescue Mission's failure. The Holloway Report states:

"Many things that, in the opinion of the review group, could have been done to enhance mission success were not done because of OPSEC considerations. The review group considers that most of the alternatives could have been incorporated without an adverse OPSEC impact..."²¹

How far did compartmentalization interfere? Consider the statement made after the raid by Colonel Beckwith, leader of the element which was to actually execute the rescue. When asked by reporters if there was a "point of no return" for the operation, Beckwith replied, "[T]hat was the air part of it and I wasn't read into it."²² Weather forecasters supporting the rescue mission could not do face-to-face briefs with the helicopter pilots because of OPSEC and did not fully brief them on the dust-storm phenomenons which occur in Iran. The pilots were thus unprepared for this obstacle. The helicopter pilots were not even provided with the weather annex to the operations order.

Concern for interception of radio transmission by the Iranians caused the helicopters to proceed into Iran with orders to maintain radio silence. When Helicopter #5 received instrument readings indicating a mechanical problem in the midst of the dust storm, the pilot made the decision to turn around and return to the Nimitz. In debriefings after the mission, the pilot stated that had he been able to

radio ahead to Desert One and had been informed that the weather was clear, which it was, he would have proceeded forward. This would have provided the assault force with six helicopters, the minimum needed to continue with the mission. The Holloway Commission determined that the use of secure radios would not have endangered the mission.

Lessons for Special Operations Today

It is evident that the principles followed during the Son Tay Raid were not followed during the Iranian Rescue Mission. It may not have occurred to the planners of Operation EAGLE CLAW that they had another operation to refer to for lessons-learned. They may have considered the two missions distinct and thus disregarded Son Tay because of this. Today's SOF must not fall into the same traps, especially with the added benefit of extensive after action reports and internal studies, such as the Holloway Commission's report. Even after twenty years, however, some of the same mistakes are being made at all levels, while a false sense of bravado continues to cloud this dangerous fact.

This is also consistent in regard to the four principles of objective, unity of command, unity of effort, and security used to compare Son Tay Raid and Iranian Rescue Mission. This nation's military has made vast improvements in certain areas, but further refinements must continue.

The biggest improvement has been in unity of command. The Holloway Commission recommended that a standing JTF be organized to undertake similar special operations and would alleviate problems in unity of command. Though classified, it is general knowledge that such an JTF has been organized and has proven its effectiveness since the post-Desert One days. In addition, SOF of all services has been placed under the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) to insure they are properly trained, equipped and maintain constant readiness. Also, each regional Commander-in-Chief (CINC) has a theater Special Operations Commander (SOC) to command and control special operations and to advise the CINC on such matters.

Security continues to be a significant consideration with today's operations. Force protection is at the forefront in the planning of every operation, whether an exercise, MOOTW, or war. It preserves surprise, a key tenet in every special operation. As has been discussed, obstacles to mission success can

be emplaced through overbearing OPSEC requirements. SOF, like all forces, has been proactive by insuring operators are fully briefed on all aspects of their mission and that no information which may aid them in its execution is omitted. Units supporting special operations now have FOCAL POINT officers who are read-in on special mission units, so that requirements are known and the appropriate support can be provided in a timely manner.

It would be risky to assume that improvements could not be made in regards to unity of command and security. Lessons are learned on each mission, but it appears that SOF is making the warranted progression. However, the same degree of success with respect to objective and unity of effort has not come to fruition and in recent missions has proven just as tragic as the Desert One mishap.

With respect to unity of effort, it seems that, internal to SOF, this problem has been corrected. With the formation of USSOCOM, all special operations have been brought under one command which insures their readiness and interoperability. However, a disconnect in unity of effort between SOF and conventional forces continues to cause friction. Similar friction was encountered between SF units and the Marine pilots during the Iranian Rescue Mission.

With most operations conducted today being MOOTW, each service jockeys to participate to insure that their prominence is maintained and budgets are not reduced. The US Marine Corps has touted their Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Operations Capable (MEUSOC) as a viable force which can accomplish most missions assigned to SOF. The US Army sees its airborne and light infantry divisions as highly mobile, rapid-deployment units which can be utilized in all conditions and situations. When there is only one fight in town, all services try to participate. Operations such as non-combatant evacuations in Liberia, the O'Grady rescue in Bosnia, and drug interdiction operations in South America have become prime opportunities to display one's capabilities.

The traps encountered in the past must be avoided. Each service must know its limitations. SOF must identify what is an appropriate mission and have the resolve to speak up when it is more appropriate for conventional forces to execute the mission. Likewise, when SOF and conventional units operate together, planning must be integrated, rehearsals must be thorough, and coordination must be

complete. Liaison elements, such as the Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE) represent a viable mechanism for insuring that unity of effort is maintained.

Emphasis on the operation's objectives remains as paramount as ever, yet ambiguous, unclear objectives continue to be the most costly mistake committed today. The tragedy of Task Force Ranger in Somalia in October 1993 proves this point.

This special operation JTF was assigned the mission to capture Somali-warlord Mohammed Aidid, but was not given the sufficient tools to meet the objective. Equipment such as armored-vehicles and AC-130 Gunships were withheld by the National Command Authority (NCA) because they did not want to give the appearance of an escalating situation. This move was eerily reminiscent of President Carter's refusal to allow air strikes in Iran. In the end eighteen special operators would die in the streets of Mogadishu and the United States would courteously bow to Aidid, even going as far as providing him with transportation aboard a US aircraft.

With the national implications carried on each special operations mission, failure is not an option. Today's special operations leadership must insure that objectives are clearly defined and that the necessary political commitment is given. If these prerequisites are not present, then planning should proceed no further until they are rectified. Intestinal fortitude is a valued trait among special operators and must be displayed at the highest levels, and if necessary, leaders must resign before sacrificing precious lives on missions doomed from the outset.

Conclusion

In this post-Cold War period, the US may be deceived into a feeling of tranquillity and security. However, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the continuing use of terrorism as a instrument for ideological gain make this country as vulnerable as ever. Special operations forces must be prepared to execute the nation's most difficult and significant missions in pursuit of national-strategic objectives. By studying past operations and examining their positive and negative aspects, SOF can improve its readiness and avoid the costly errors made in April 1980.

NOTES

¹ Benjamin F. Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 133.

² In their short stand at the "Secondary School," the twenty-one Green Berets killed an estimated 100-200 enemy personnel, a large number later identified as Chinese advisors. Certain individuals credited this mistake with preventing a large contingent of enemy forces from moving on the objective during the operation.

³ The only casualties sustained were one minor bullet wound and one broken ankle. One F-105 Wild Weasel was shot down by a surface-to-air missile, but the pilots were immediately located and rescued.

⁴ The operatives consisted of two US Army soldiers, an Air Force Sergeant, and Major (Retired) Richard J. Meadows. It was Meadows, a career Special Forces soldier, who led the assault element at Son Tay, which crash-landed directly into the prison compound, neutralized enemy forces and searched for the POWs. Ten years later, posing as an Irish businessman, he led this team of Americans into Tehran, conducted close reconnaissance of the embassy, and rented the vans which would transport the assault element to the target. After the fiasco at Desert One, the operatives were informed via radio and they departed from Iran without incident.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War (Joint Pub 3-07) (Washington, D.C.: June 16, 1995), II-2.

⁶ Benjamin F. Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 68.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁹ Paul B. Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission-Why It Failed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 60.

¹⁰ Benjamin F. Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 283.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The members of the Holloway Commission were: Admiral James L. Holloway III, US Navy (Retired); Lieutenant General Samuel V. Wilson, US Army (Retired); Major General James C. Smith, US Army; Major General John L. Piotrowski, US Air Force; Major General Alfred M. Gray, US Marine Corps; and Lieutenant General LeRoy J. Manor, US Air Force (Retired), who served as COMJTF for the Son Tay Raid.

¹³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Iranian Rescue Mission Report (Washington, D.C.: 1980), 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ Paul B. Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission-Why It Failed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 26.

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Iranian Rescue Mission Report (Washington, D.C.: 1980), 50.

¹⁷ Benjamin F. Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 139.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Iranian Rescue Mission Report (Washington, D.C.: 1980), 26.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Benjamin F. Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper & Row , 1976), 97-98.

²¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Iranian Rescue Mission Report (Washington, D.C.: 1980), IV.

²² Paul B. Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission-Why It Failed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 103.

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